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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine whether a relationship existed between developmental English students' perceptions of the usefulness of writing in their lives and their performance in composition classrooms. Students enrolled in the developmental English course and the companion writing center course completed a writing attitude questionnaire. At the end of the term, students' attitude scores were examined in light of the progress they had made in both courses. This progress was measured by a pretest and posttest of editing skills, and an in-class expository essay. The 65 students were subsequently grouped into the following categories according to their test results: (1) 30 students improved on both the editing and the essay tests; (2) 17 students improved on the editing tests but declined in their essay scores; (3) 14 students improved on the editing test but showed no change in essay scores; (4) two students declined on the editing but improved on the essay; and (5) the two remaining students showed no improvement on either test. The results indicated that students' perceptions of the usefulness of writing have little bearing on their writing performance. The writing attitudes of the group that improved on both measurements did not significantly differ from the attitudes of those students who showed either no change or a decline in their writing. (HTH)

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The Effect of Developmental English Students' Perceptions about the Importance of Writing on their Performance in Composition Classes

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Paper presented at the Southeastern Writing Center Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on April 18, 1985.

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A study was undertaken in the Writing Center at the University of Florida to determine whether a relationship exists between Developmental English students' perceptions of the usefulness of writing in their lives and their performance in their composition classes. The issue arises because the progress of these students often varies widely despite the seeming homogeneity of their backgrounds and the similar content of courses they take. For example, students are screened into the Developmental English course and the companion Writing Center course on the basis both of a common cut-off score on the Test of Standard Written English and of student performance on an holistically scored essay; once placed in these courses, students follow highly structured and closely monitored curricula. But in spite of these similarities, post-tests often reveal a wide disparity of results: while some students improve substantially, other students show no change at all, and a few students even appear to decline. The purpose behind this study was, therefore, to ascertain the extent to which attitude might contribute - if at all - for the varying degrees of improvement or decline that can occur in developmental writing.

Previous Research

Much research has been done by Daly and others on writing apprehension and its far-reaching effects on students. For example, as Faigley, Daly, and Witte (1981) found, apprehension can adversely affect students' writing performance, with very anxious writers producing shorter, simpler papers than their less worried peers. Similar results have been obtained by Daly and his

* I am very grateful to Dianne Buhr, the assistant testing and evaluation director for the Office of Instructional Resources, for her invaluable assistance with the statistical analysis.

colleagues in other contexts. Not only did Daly (1978) find that apprehensive writers scored more poorly on an objective test of grammar and mechanics than did the low apprehensives, but also the degree of writing apprehension which students exhibited affected their choices of courses (Daly and Shamo, 1978) and ultimately, of occupations as well (Daly and Miller, 1975).

Despite the far-reaching effects of writing apprehension, Daly notes that the link between attitude toward, and performance in, writing is not strong. For example, he states, "The suggestion has never been made that attitude and performance should be, or are, highly related. Indeed, the overriding emphasis has always been that attitude (as partially represented by the apprehension construct) and aptitude or performance represent relatively separate domains in the area of writing. They should be related, but not at a magnitude much greater than that obtained in the present study" (1978, p. 13). The magnitude to which he refers is a variance of nine percent. This observation seems confirmed as well by Thomas Reigstad, who notes that in a recent SUNY study, decreases in writing anxiety were predicted by external factors rather than by any improvement in writing performance (1985).

However, as Daly acknowledges, the apprehension construct represents simply one part of overall attitude; therefore, one might speculate that those students who perceive writing to be an essential skill will make more of an effort to improve - no matter how distasteful the task - than do other basic writers who view writing as not only unpleasant but also unimportant. Certainly the importance of motivation on writing performance has been shown by J. D. Williams and Scott Alden (1983), who recently found that extrinsically motivated students, unlike their more intrinsically motivated peers, viewed

writing as unimportant and did not seek to improve their ability.

Therefore, the following hypothesis was formulated for testing:

> The degree to which Developmental English students perceive writing to be useful or important might affect their performance in writing classes as measured by pre-post essays and objective tests.

Measurement Design and Procedures

As a test of this hypothesis, students enrolled in the three-credit Developmental English course and its one-credit companion Writing Center course were administered a Writing Attitude Questionnaire (See Appendix A) during the middle of the fall term. Similar in format to Daly and Miller's instrument, the questionnaire assessed students' attitudes toward their writing experiences in high school, in their current writing courses, and in their anticipated majors and careers. A few of the 26 items resembled those asked by Daly and Miller, as in the example "I dislike writing, and I am always glad to finish any writing assignment." However, the great majority of items focused on students' perceptions of the utility of writing. In this emphasis on applicability, some items resembled those recently found in the "Writing Attitude Scale" as discussed by Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew in the new NCTE booklet Training Tutors for Writing Conferences (1984). Questions dealing with the utility of writing are illustrated in the following examples:

> "I would like to improve my writing because it is an essential skill."
>
> "Writing will probably not play a major role in my life once I graduate."

Items denoting positive or negative attitudes toward writing were interspersed throughout the questionnaire, as were items pertaining to current or

future writing experiences. However, none of these categories were designated on the actual questionnaires that students completed.

A scoring procedure was used similar to that with the Daly and Miller instrument. That is, the ratings given by students to the positive questions were added to a base of 78; then the total ratings given by students to the negative questions were subtracted from the combined score. Scores could range from a high of 130 if students agreed very strongly about writing utility to a low of 26 if, conversely, they held very negative views toward the usefulness of writing.

At the end of the term, students' attitude scores were examined in light of the progress they had made in both Developmental English and the Writing Center courses. In the Writing Center classes a pre-post objective Test of Editing skills was administered to measure students' ability to identify errors in grammar, usage, mechanics, spelling, and sentence structure; in the Developmental English classes an in-class expository essay was given. These pre-post essays were subsequently intermingled for an holistic scoring by an independent team of raters. The scoring was done in a controlled setting, with rangefinders and samples from previous readings used to establish a continuity in scoring standards.

For each student a data sheet was then prepared (See Appendix B), containing the student's coded responses to the attitude questionnaire, the difference in pre-and post-grammar scores, and the difference in pre- and post-essay scores. The sixty-five students on whom all five pieces of information were available comprised the subjects of this study. Thirty were male, thirty-five, female; most were minority freshmen specially admitted to the University with SAT scores below 840 and Test of Standard Written English

scores of 37 or below.

Results

The 65 students were subsequently grouped into the following categories according to their test results: The largest group (Group A), containing 30 students, improved on both the editing and essay tests. The second largest group (Group B), 17 students in all, improved on the editing test but declined in their essay scores. The third group (Group C), consisting of 14 students, improved on the editing test but showed no change in essay scores. The two students comprising Group D declined on the editing test but improved on the essay, while the two remaining students (Group E) showed no improvement on either test.

The mean scores for the total writing attitudes of the five groups are listed in Table 1. An analysis of variance test (ANOVA) of the hypothesis found no significant difference in the attitude scores among the various groups [F=4,60)=1.85;P=.13].

Table 1 about here

Even when the Writing Attitude totals were divided into the subsets of attitudes toward the usefulness of writing in the past, in the present, and in the future, the mean scores reflected little significant difference.

Furthermore, as noted in Table 2, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients showed virtually no relationship between the Writing Attitude Total of students and their performances on either the essay tests or the objective Tests of Editing Skills; this finding was not surprising in view of the little variance in attitude scores among the various groups. The only correlations that were at all meaningful were those between the total attitude

scores and the pre-grammar tests or between the subset "Attitude toward Writing in the Present" and pre- and post-objective test scores. However, these correlations were very low - at the level of .26 or .25; moreover, no significant correlation at all was found between writing attitude and essay scores.

Table 2 about here

Finally, an item analysis of the questionnaire revealed a full range of responses occurring for all questions except for number 6. No one responded with a rating of 3 (uncertain) or a rating of 2 (disagree) to the statement "I would like to improve my writing because it is an essential skill." All the other items elicited, to varying degrees, a full range of ratings.

Conclusion and Implications

Thus, there is insufficient evidence to accept the hypothesis, for students' perceptions of the usefulness of writing have little bearing on their writing performances. That is, the writing attitudes of the group that improved on both measurements did not significantly differ from the attitudes of those students who showed either no change at all or a decline in their writing. Whatever motivational factors may have contributed to the progress - or lack thereof - which some students demonstrated in their writing performances, these elements did not include student attitudes toward the importance of writing.

Such a finding should not be altogether surprising in that students' attitudes to writing do not seem clearly defined at this stage of their lives,

and another administration of the questionnaire might very well have elicited different responses from the same students. Moreover, the test sample was small and the reliability of the instrument itself in need of further clarification. Nevertheless, this ambiguity or inconclusiveness of student attitudes toward writing serves to confirm Daly's observation noted earlier about the lack of a substantial relationship between writing attitudes and actual performance.

To acknowledge the seeming unimportance of students' attitudes toward writing on the effectiveness of the compositions that result is not, however, to suggest that attitude should be disregarded altogether. For developmental students in particular, many of whose writing experiences have been infrequent and unsuccessful, effecting a change in attitude would seem desirable. More effort could, or should, be made to convey to these students for whom writing is so often a source of extreme anxiety the true significance of writing skills. For example, helping students to see that writing is important in the world of work, even in those disciplines often not associated with verbal skills, such as engineering, may make their mastery of writing skills seem more significant. Similarly, focusing on those larger skills - organization, clarity of purpose, and audience - that are essential both in their college careers and in their prospective jobs afterward should make students' writing tasks more meaningful to them (Aldrich, p. 285). Even more important, assisting students in seeing that, as Donald Graves has indicated, "Writing is most important not as etiquette, not even as a tool, but as a contribution to the development of a person, no matter what that person's background and talents" (p. 62) should be a vital part of the curriculum.

Certainly student attitudes toward the usefulness of writing will be changed neither by a few lectures nor by a single writing course. However, students can receive a strong message from a class that emphasizes not only the extrinsic importance of writing skills, but also the intrinsic value of grappling with the writing process in order to clarify and communicate ideas. As developmental students begin to write more themselves, to gain confidence in their work, and to see the larger significance of what they do, a link may possibly be found between more positive student attitudes toward writing and an improved quality within the writing itself.

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Appendix A

WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE

Name _____ Date _____
Last, First

Age _____ Race _____ Class _____

Is this your first term in college? _____

Have you had a writing course at this universit before? _____

Are you taking a reading course now? _____

The following questions ask you about your attitudes to writing. Please respond honestly by checking the category that best describes your reaction to the statement listed.
Note: Your answers will not affect your work in courses you are now taking.

		5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Uncertain	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Agree
- P 1.	Writing was never emphasized during my high school days.					
+ P 2.	During high school I was required to write either a book report, an essay, or a short paper almost every month.					
+ P 3.	My English classes during high school should have required me to do more writing.					

*Note: The P refers to past writing experiences, the N to current writing experiences, and the F to future experiences. The pluses and minuses denote statements that reflect positive or negative attitudes toward writing. None of the labels existed on the questionnaires given the students.

		5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Uncertain	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
- P	4. Before this year, I never wrote many letters for personal reasons.					
+ N	5. College freshmen should be required to take writing courses.					
+ N	6. I would like to improve my writing because it is an essential skill.					
- N	7. I would never have chosen to take a writing course at college.					
+ N	8. I am pleased with the progress that I have made in my current writing course.					
- N	9. My main goal in my writing course is to get a better grade.					
+ N	10. Because writing is important to me, I spend at least two hours on each assignment.					
+ N	11. I write better on essays done outside class rather than on essays done in class because I can spend more time on the assignments.					
+ N	12. The emphasis that my writing course has placed on both pre-writing and revision has helped my work to improve.					

		5 Strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Uncertain	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
+ N 13.	I make many changes in my papers before I turn them in.					
- N 14.	I dislike having my writing graded.					
- F 15.	I would never choose a major that requires much writing.					
- F 16.	Writing will probably not play a major role in my life once I graduate.					
- N 17.	I have great difficulty in organizing my ideas.					
- N 18.	My frequent mistakes in grammar hurt my writing grades.					
- N 19.	My most common mistakes are in punctuation and spelling.					
+ N 20.	I often write letters to family and friends.					
+ F 21.	Writing will probably be an important skill for me in the rest of my college work.					
+ F 22.	Writing will probably be essential for the major I am likely to choose.					
- N 23.	I dislike writing, and I am always glad to finish any writing assignment.					
- N 24.	I do not like to have other students read my papers.					
+ F 25.	I will probably have to write memos, reports, or similar documents in my future career.					
- F 26.	In the future I am likely to conduct my personal affairs by telephone rather than by writing.					

Appendix B

WRITING ATTITUDE STUDY

Student Name: _____

The number of the column students have checked is recorded beside the designated question.

	PAST		NOW		FUTURE	
Question	+	-	+	-	+	-
		1)	5)			15)
	2)		6)			16)
	3)			7)	21)	
		4)	8)		22)	
				9)	25)	
			10)			26)
			11)			
			12)			
			13)	14)		
				17)		
				18)		
				19)		
			20)			
				23)		
				24)		
Total from each column	+	-	+	-	+	-

Add together the plus totals: _____.
Combine the plus totals with +78 for a combined score: _____.
Add together the negative totals: _____.
Subtract the negative total from the combined score: _____.

Attitude total: _____.

Pre-Grammar Score _____ Pre-Essay Score _____

Post-Grammar Score _____ Post-Essay Score _____

Difference + _____ Difference + _____

Difference - _____ Difference - _____

Table 1

	Mean Attitude Score	Standard Deviation
Group A (Improved on both tests) N=30	92.43	9.14
Group B (Improved on Editing but declined on Essay) N=17	89.29	10.68
Group C (Improved on Editing but did not change on Essay score) N=14	89.71	10.21
Group D (Declined on Editing but improved on Essay score) N=2	82.50	3.53
Group C (No improvement and/or no charge on both tests) N=2	106.00	16.97

TABLE 2

Correlation Coefficients*

	Total attitude Score	Pre-Grammar Score	Post-Grammar Score	Pre-Essay Score	Post-Essay Score	Attitude toward Writing in the Past	Attitude toward Writing in the Present	Attitude toward Writing in the Future
Total Attitude Score	1.00 .00	.25* .043	.22 .074	.02 .893	.07 .572	.43* .0001	.85* .0001	.74* .0001
Pre-Grammar Score	.25* .043	1.00 .000	.57* .0001	.34* .005	.22 .084	.12 .348	.25* .043	.125 .321
Post-Grammar Score	.22 .074	.57* .000	1.00 .0000	.32* .010	.27* .033	.13 .303	.26* .034	.09 .465
Pre-Essay Score	.02 .893	.34* .005	.32* .010	1.000 .000	.34* .006	.040 .770	.01 .923	.04 .782
Post-Essay Score	.07 .572	.22 .084	.27* .033	.34* .006	1.000 .000	.03 .790	.06 .612	-0.02 .848
Attitude Toward Writing in the Past	.43* .003	.12 .348	.13 .303	.04 .770	.03* .790	1.000 .00	.26* .040	.21 .093
Attitude toward Writing in the Present	.85* .0001	.25* .043	.26* .034	.01 .923	.06 .612	.26* .040	1.00 .000	.46 .000
Attitude toward Writing in the Future	.74 .000	.13 .321	.09 .465	.03 .782	-0.02 .848	.21 .092	.46* .000	1.00 .000

*Significant at alpha < .05

Correlation coefficients are rounded to the nearest hundredth

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